

estled comfortably in his plush leather chair, he sits quietly, devouring another book from his favorite author. Only the gentle, steady tick, tock from the pre-Civil War wall clock breaks the peaceful silence.

He slowly turns the page and runs his weathered but strong fingers down the center of the book. It's a good book. Based during the Korean War, the story uses real people and real-world events to add a sense of depth and realism to its tale. That's what he likes most about this author — the way he writes.

And retired Maj. John Yingling knows his stuff. A veteran of both World War II and the Korean Conflict, he has been a part of many historical military events. In fact, during his tour in Korea, he made fighter pilot history.



Retired Maj. John Yingling sits at his home at the Air Force Village near Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. "Living here, in the birthplace of Air Force Airmen, I get to see the next generation of Airmen in action," he said.

The major is the only known P-51 Mustang fighter pilot to ever shoot down a MiG-15.

But his story doesn't appear in many, if any, books. No Internet searches or Web sites chronicle his historic action. The only testament to his mark on history is a slightly faded Distinguished Flying Cross kept in a worn picture frame hanging in his home.

But that is OK with him.

"None of us realized at the time what kind of impact we would have," the major said. "We were just doing the job we were trained to do."

His training began in 1941 at the age of 16. His father had been caught up in Officer Candidacy School and missed fighting in World War I — something he always regretted. So he gave his son permission to join the Navy so he could fight in World War II. They invented

a fake birthday to make him old enough to join and before he knew it, he was a Navy aerial gunner.

After flying and fighting over the Pacific, his service was up and the major went home.

"I never intended on making the military a career," he said. But after enrolling in college at the University of Connecticut, the \$20 dollars a month the ROTC paid was just too tempting to resist.

While in college he witnessed the birth of the Air Force. As an Air Force ROTC cadet, he would become one of the Air Force's first officers. He graduated college on June 6, 1950, and the Korean Conflict began a few weeks later.

Control of the skies

As the war in Korea raged, Major Yingling began flying the P-51 Mustang. The single-seat prop fighter entered military service during World War II and became highly successful as a bomber escort in raids over Germany. The Mustang also served against Japanese air forces in the Pacific and began the Korean Conflict as the fighter of choice.

Then the skies over Korea erupted with a new age in airpower as the new Mikoyan Gurevich 15, or MiG-15, grabbed control of air supremacy in the region. The MiG-15 was a modern-age jet fighter originally developed in the Soviet Union, and one of the first jets to successfully use a sweptwing design. China began receiving the jets in 1950, and it was Chinese MiG-15s that seized control of the Korean skies during the conflict. Its superior design, speed and powerful cannons outclassed all other enemy fighters. Its presence caused a redeployment of United Nations aircraft in Korea. The U.S. Air Force began utilizing the F-86 Sabres to combat the MiG threat.

As the MiG-15 was changing the skies of aerial warfare, Major Yingling eventually landed with the 18th Fighter-Bomber Wing in Korea — the last wing flying the P-51s in the war. Because of the MiG presence, all of the previous P-51 units had been pulled out and replaced with jets like the F-86 Sabre. By the end of the war, the Sabres racked up an impressive 10-1 aerial kill ratio versus the MiG. The P-51's role was also changed to focus on missions like providing downed pilot air cover and bombing.

It was on a routine bombing mission that the major made history.

The flight of Miss Dee

One early morning in late May of 1952, then-1st Lt. Yingling climbed into his P-51, "Miss Dee," — named after his wife — and prepared for take off. At 8 a.m., a dozen Mustangs lifted off and began their aerial trek north.

After two hours at 14,000 feet, the fighters reached their target — the rail lines below the Yalu River, which separates North Korea and China. Major Yingling had never been this deep in enemy territory before.

According to the major, they usually dive bombed their targets from 4,000 to 5,000 feet at speeds of more than 300 miles per hour. This run was different, and as "Miss Dee" roared downward, his speedometer raced up to 400 miles per hour.



Keeping a critical eye on his speed, he swooped in and Miss Dee dropped her 500-pound bomb payload over the target. Fire and smoke erupted across the ground. The major quickly scanned his speed indicator before jerking his head around to visually confirm the target's hit as he began cruising skyward.

As he swung his gaze back forward, he noticed a "specter" in the sky ahead of him. A second later the specter materialized. It was a MiG-15 and they were flying straight at each other — head-on like two aerial gunslingers.

A shockwave washed over Major Yinging and he breathed, "Oh my God." His training kicked in and his steely grip pulled "Miss Dee's" sights up onto the MiG. Still head-to-head, he squeezed the trigger and sent a burst of cannon fire toward the enemy fighter — tracer rounds slicing through the MiG's airframe.

Making a quick acrobatic maneuver, "Miss Dee" barely screamed past the MiG at 5,000 feet, so close that the major could see the "ruddy" face of the pilot. He quickly peeled away and ran south. Major Yingling's wingman saw the MiG pilot bail out of his crippled aircraft — confirming the aerial kill.

As quickly as it started, it was over. The whole dog fight lasted a few seconds. Mustangs don't shoot down MiGs — he had done the impossible.

"It felt like sheer elation," he said. "It was the highlight of my career." After Major Yingling returned from the mission, recognition of his victory was slow coming. In fact, he said 5th Air Force didn't recognize the aerial kill for two months. Officials took the gun camera film and evaluated it, because common knowledge said that Mustangs don't shoot down MiGs. They assumed it must have been one of the F-86s, but they were cruising high above at 16,000 feet.

Once the kill was confirmed, his aerial victory was still kept quiet. It was decided that this would be bad publicity for the "MiG

Killers" — the F-86s, the major said. Also, the intelligence community wanted him to stay quiet about the "ruddy" faced pilot he'd seen. The Chinese were supposedly the only air force flying the MiGs over Korea, but Chinese pilots don't have "ruddy" faces. Russian pilots do — which would have been volatile information about Russia's support during the conflict.

Nonetheless, Major Yingling's quick-thinking combat skills eventually resulted in him being awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his one and only aerial kill.

Proud of the past, future

After his time in Korea, the Illinois-native continued his Air Force service, becoming a missile maintenance officer and eventually retiring as a major in 1967. He began working at the Kennedy Space Center several years later, where he retired before settling in San Antonio. He now enjoys reflecting on his career in the Air Force Village near Lackland Air Force Base.

"It was wonderful. It is a part of my life that will always be a high point — it's unforgettable," the major said.

As the father of eight children and grandfather of 13, he has proudly watched one grandchild serve and another, in his third year of college, wants to serve in the Army and then in the Air Force.

On days like today, retired-Maj. John Yingling, the only known P-51 Mustang fighter pilot to ever shoot down a MiG-15, rests at ease doing what he enjoys most — reading his favorite books and cooking for his lovely wife, Corrinda. He can rest at ease because he knows America's future is in good hands.

"Living here, in the birthplace of Air Force Airmen, I get to see the next generation of Airmen in action," he said. "They will carry their Air Force experience for the rest of their lives. I think it's wonderful that so many of these great folks are willing to step forward. They have accepted this responsibility with pride."

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